An Opportunity Lost

By Mel Lavine

President Obama said some beautiful things in Tucson but I'm with the reader from Los Altos who wrote the San Francisco Chronicle that he'd hoped the president "would have pushed for something more immediately practical in the wake of the shootings." Like making it "simpler for the families of mentally ill people" to get the help they need and to make "it more difficult for "disturbed individuals" to acquire lethal weapons.

That would have been something to take to the new House of Representatives, where the Republicans are planning to begin the process of killing the Obama health care law. A spectacle to be sure, but probably no more than that for even if repeal did carry the day in the senate, which is unlikely, Obama surely would veto it.

Given the shocking events in Tucson, a presidential funeral oration was the moment to address the concerns raised by the Los Altos letter-writer. The president was speaking just five days before the country celebrated the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was killed by an assassin on April 4 in 1968. In that same year Robert Kennedy, who well might have gone on

to the presidency, was shot and killed after winning the Democratic presidential primary in June in California.

It would have taken only a moment, but Obama had an opportunity to strengthen the case for saner gun laws in this country. It was an opportunity lost. As Bob Herbert, the New York Times columnist, pointed out, about 100,000 shootings occur in the United States every year. More than a million people have died from gun violence – in murders, accidents and suicides since Dr. King and Robert Kennedy were killed.

Ever since he came to power in 2009 with a large plurality and with overwhelming majorities in the House and Senate., the president has been pulling his punches. With the country in economic crisis he put jobs on the back burner and the prosperity of Wall Street on the front. He dropped the public option on his health plan to placate the special interests. He yielded on tax breaks for the rich in exchange for an extension of unemployment benefits.

The issue of tax breaks for the rich versus an extension of aid to the unemployed is an argument most Democratic would seize. But not this Democratic president.

Why not? My guess is he's calculated that the middle road is the way toward winning re-election. Perhaps he's thinking that once he's won a second term he'll have the freedom to do what's right and not just what's pragmatic.

But a reading of history informs us that the presidents who achieve big things are usually those who strike early, that is in their first term. Notable examples in the last 100 years: FDR (Social Security); LBJ (Medicare); Woodrow Wilson (federal income tax).

The novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said there are no second acts in American life. He could also have been speaking of politics.

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